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BYRON and the GREEK TRADITION

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TWO SHILLINGS

The thirty-third Byron Foundation Lecture was delivered on Friday, 4th December, 1959, the Chairman being PROFESSOR VIVIAN DE SOLA PINTO, M.A., D.Phil.

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PROFESSOR J. ISAACS, M.A. (*not printed*)

*1953 *Byron's Dramatic Prose*
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*1956 *Two Exiles: Lord Byron and D. H. Lawrence.*
GRAHAM HOUGH, M.A.

*1958 *Byron and Italy*
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BYRON AND THE GREEK TRADITION

The title of my lecture, 'Byron and the Greek Tradition', may sound a little pretentious or pompous for such a lively and *actuel* poet as Byron, one who mocked at the stuffiness of pedants; who referred to those 'two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*'(1); and who, to an enquiry about the intention of his greatest poem, could derisively retort, 'Do you suppose that I could have any intention but to giggle and make giggle'(2). Yet I ask pardon for my over-dignified title, which I have chosen because I wish to comment on certain aspects of his poetry which are perhaps less obvious today than they were in the last century, and in course of time are likely to become still less obvious.

Byron has always been recognized as a European; and like Goethe he was vividly conscious of the European culture he inherited. He had great celerity of mind and a tenacious memory. He was a constant reader, and he was one of those who brought to his reading 'a spirit and judgment equal or superior' to what he read. The amount of erudition in his writings is considerable.

Byron repeatedly expressed his aversion to the classical education of boys of his time. He learned as much 'as most schoolboys after a discipline of thirteen years'.(3)

> I abhorr'd
> Too much, to conquer for the poet's sake,
> The drill'd dull lesson, forced down word by word
> In my repugnant youth, with pleasure to record
>
> Aught that recalls the daily drug which turn'd
> My sickening memory.(4)

But this censure was derived from the disappointed vigour of his own mind. And he was an equally severe critic of Cambridge. In his rhymed couplets, *Thoughts suggested by a*

College Examination, he derides the neglect of English literature, history, and law for the sake of a narrow emphasis on classical literature, history, and law. 'Happy the youth' (he sarcastically exclaims)

> Who, scarcely skill'd an English line to pen,
> Scans Attic metres with a critic's ken.
> What, though he knows not how his fathers bled,
> When civil discord piled the fields with dead,
> When Edward bade his conquering bands advance,
> Or Henry trampled on the crest of France,
> Though marvelling at the name of Magna Charta,
> Yet well he recollects the laws of Sparta ;
> Can tell what edicts sage Lycurgus made,
> While Blackstone's on the shelf neglected laid ;
> Of Grecian dramas vaunts the deathless fame,
> Of Avon's bard remembering scarce the name.

In fact we know a fair amount about Byron's reading during his 'repugnant youth'. He was notable at school, he tells us, for 'the extent and readiness of my *general* information'. This caused suspicion—that he acquired it from skimming magazines and reviews—'because I was never *seen* reading, but always idle and in mischief, or at play. The truth is that I read eating, read in bed, read when no one else reads ; and had read all sorts of reading since I was five years old'([5]). We have details of the contents of a note-book, dated when he was aged nineteen, in which he has scribbled down his reading lists. It is a formidable body of material : literature, ancient and modern, English and continental ; poetry, history, and belles-lettres, in great quantities, including most of the important Greek and Roman writers ; and 'above four thousand novels' (a scarcely credible figure).([6])

'My head is crammed with the most useless lumber', Byron confessed in his journal([7]), and certainly few of us can command fully the knowledge of history and literature and experience of foreign countries which are woven into Byron's poetry. His poems encourage annotation, though not explication, more than those of any of his contemporaries. He published them with ample notes, sometimes not much less in bulk than the poems themselves ; and arranged for the publication of a whole volume (by Hobhouse and Foscolo) in illustration of the fourth canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. He came to think of himself as a scholar, as well as a rake. (There was no inconsistency in this—we remember that Jack Wilkes was an excellent classical scholar and

published editions of Theophrastus and Catullus.) When Byron suffered from the 'roving fit' in London, he would frequently talk (Dallas tells us) 'of going to reside at Naxos, in the Grecian Archipelago, to adopt the eastern costume and customs, and to pass his time in studying the Oriental languages and literature'.(8) 'In the spring of 1813', he wrote exasperatedly to a friend in February 1812, 'I shall leave England for ever . . . I shall find employment in making myself a good Oriental scholar. I shall retain a mansion in one of the fairest islands, and retrace, at intervals, the most interesting portions of the East.'(9) In the next few years much was to happen to Byron, but something of this dream of the scholar-rake was realised in due course when he had settled in Venice. 'I am studying daily, at an Armenian monastery, the Armenian language. I found that my mind wanted something craggy to break upon.'(10)

From some of his literary acquaintances he seems (with that perverseness which we so often find in him—or perhaps it was only his idea of good manners) to have deliberately disguised his literary knowledge. His politeness to his admired Sir Walter Scott, when he met him in the spring of 1815, lead to a curious record by Scott :

'Lord Byron's reading did not seem to me to have been very extensive either in poetry or history. Having the advantage of him in that respect, and possessing a good competent share of such reading as is little read, I was sometimes able to put under his eye objects which had for him the interest of novelty.'(11)

And Leigh Hunt, too, giving his rather touchy characterization of Byron, said that 'his acquaintance with books was very circumscribed'.(12) But Lady Blessington was a shrewder observer, with whom Byron had little need to play a part:

'He told me that he rarely ever read a page that did not give rise to chains of thought . . . His memory is extraordinary, for he can repeat lines from every author whose works have pleased him ; and in reciting the passages that have called forth his censure or ridicule, it is no less tenacious.'

And she adds elsewhere :

'Byron's reading is very desultory. He peruses every book that falls in his way, devouring their contents with great rapidity ; but those he wishes to study he reads slowly, and not unfrequently twice. There is no book, however puerile,

from which he does not glean some thought, which transmitted through the alembic of his powerful mind, acquires a new value. He confesses that even books of little merit have often suggested images and trains of thought to him which he has turned to good account.'[13]

We know now, since the details of the manuscripts of *Don Juan* have been published, what a conscientious literary craftsman Byron could be. We know what he meant by his opinion that 'easy reading is cursed hard writing'. Of course, he would rarely acknowledge his artistic virtue, any more than he allowed himself to be seen reading at school. 'No one has done more through negligence to corrupt the language' was his self-condemnation.

But in building up a picture of Byron as the scholar-rake, not unknown to English tradition, I must acknowledge that persons who live by learning, and not by literature, have a professional interest in literary backgrounds ; and this is capable of turning even Byron into a professor's poet. During the few generations since 'academic' criticism appeared on the scene, there has been a curious tendency for poets and professors to approximate in type. Literary criticism in the universities has been full of overtones on the theme poet and pedant. The Victorian professors often combined English literature with something else ; often philosophy (moral philosophy or logic) ; perhaps English was not quite serious enough in itself. The poets they promoted generally had a mind and a message. But nowadays professors have changed. They are no longer philosophers trying to grasp the meaning of the Universe, but scholars seeking, not wisdom, but learning. And one consequence is that single-minded poets who were once supposed to have been warbling their native woodnotes wild have been wonderfully metamorphosed into hard-reading men. Burns was once a peasant-poet ; but he has come to be regarded as well-read. And Shakespeare, too, has become a reader ; no longer an idle player relying upon natural genius, but a man of letters who was aware of literature in several languages. His knowledge of foreign languages was, of course, a *reading* knowledge, quite like that of some modern professors.

My suggestions, therefore, about Byron's conscious place in the literary tradition and about his literary background, you will be wary of accepting. Yet, there is this difference between Shakespeare and Burns, on the one hand,

and Byron, on the other, as, apparently, natural poets who were also hard-reading men : Byron has given us ample accounts of his literary occupations, apart from the composition of poetry. His literary life is as well-documented as his love-life ; and he rarely felt the same urge to boast about the former as he did about the latter.

Probably not all readers of Byron know what *Childe Harold's Prilgrimage* looked like in its original quarto form in 1812 when he woke and found himself famous ; the first two cantos, with their essays on such subjects as the removal of works of art from Greece, the Albanian language (with examples), the present state of Greece and the probabilities of its liberation from Turkish rule ; and above all his thirty-three page essay on the Romaic or modern Greek language with ample specimens and translations and a facsimile folding-plate of Romaic calligraphy. This piece of Byronic scholarship has unfortunately been omitted from the standard edition of Byron's writings (the thirteen-volume edition of E. H. Coleridge and R. E. Prothero) as being 'remarkable rather for the evidence which it affords of Byron's industry and zeal for acquiring knowledge, than for the value or interest of the subject-matter'.(14) His editor was mistaken ; and our scholar-rake deserves to be judged on all his productions.

'The whole number of the Greeks, scattered up and down the Turkish empire and elsewhere' (Byron calculates) 'may amount, at most, to three millions ; and yet, for so scanty a number, it is impossible to discover any nation with so great a proportion of books and their authors, as the Greeks of the present century.' He lists a score of authors, followed by specimens of writings. He begins with the splendid war-song of Constantine Rhegas, the *Marseillaise* of the Greek Revolution, which he himself vigorously translated into verse when he was in Greece. This song of Rhegas, the patriotic poet who was put to death for his revolutionary activities in 1789, contained the seeds of many of the phil-hellenic sentiments of Byron, though it was written by Rhegas while Byron was a schoolboy. It is an exhortation to the modern Greeks to follow the example of the ancients : 'Would that the spirits of our ancestors could arise to help us to free ourselves from Turkish rule. Sparta and Athens, Leonidas and ye who fought with him at Thermopylae against the Persians—it is your spirit we need. But we must ourselves fight until we conquer and are free.' This must have been one of the first of the poems of modern

Greece with which Byron became familiar. For during their first days in Greece (in December 1809) when he and Hobhouse were lodging at Vostitza, it was recited to them by the Greek governor of the town, with passionate fervour.[15] There are many echoes of the poem in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in the verse tales, and in the Grecian part of *Don Juan*.

Byron follows this famous song of Rhegas with some other curious specimens of literature current in Greece. There is a verse story of a Russian, an Englishman, and a Frenchman, who enquire from a patriotic modern Greek why his country is enslaved ; a translation of a scene from one of Goldoni's plays ; a list of conversational phrases (including how to say such useful things as 'I love you with all my heart'); the modern Greek version of the beginning of St. John's Gospel ; part of the topographical treatise of Meletios of Janina of the early eighteenth century (a book which Byron had taken on permanent loan from the Bishop of Chrisso) ; and the prospectus of a Romaic translation of Barthélemy's *Anacharsis*, prepared by Byron's Greek teacher Marmarotouris, which he wished to get printed in England.

It is all very impressive ; and equally skilful is the review of two of William Gell's topographical books on Greece, which Byron contributed to the *Monthly Review* in August 1811, very soon after his arrival home from his travels.[16] Byron could easily adopt the tone of the reviewers of the time—their authoritative and omniscient manner:

'That laudable curiosity concerning the remains of classical antiquity, which has of late years increased among our countrymen, is in no traveller or author more conspicuous than in Mr. Gell . . . It must universally be acknowledged that any work, which more forcibly impresses on our imaginations the scenes of heroic action, and the subjects of immortal song, possesses claims on the attention of every scholar.'

Writing from his own recent and extensive experience Byron can reprimand the author for his petty inaccuracies and dubious advice ; pay a passing compliment to Strané, the consul at Patras, who had been particularly helpful ; throw doubt on the resemblance of some of Gell's 'panoramic designs' to the original places. Greece, says the reviewer, is 'the most celebrated country of the ancient world', but

'to that country, we trust, the attention not only of our travellers, but of our legislators, will hereafter be directed. The greatest caution will, indeed, be required . . . in touching on so delicate a subject as the amelioration of the possessions of an ally : but the field for the exercise of political sagacity is wide and inviting in this portion of the globe ; and Mr. Gell, and all other writers who interest us, however remotely, in its extraordinary *capabilities*, deserve well of the British empire.' And Byron concludes his review by expressing the wish that our Grecian travellers would, besides topographizing, turn their minds to the language of the country and its pronunciation.

The second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was completed in March 1810, that is, before Byron's second and more prolonged stay in Athens. It has, certainly, all the freshness of first impressions mingled with memories of schoolboy reading. But the prose essays attached to the poem belong to the studious and lively months he spent in Athens from July 1810 to April 1811 ; and there is some inconsistency of judgment between the prose and the verse.

For Byron's attitude to Greece in the poem was itself in the classical tradition ; it was not merely a romantic nostalgia. The Romans of ancient times had viewed the lost greatness of captive Greece in much the same spirit as Byron. A principal literary source of his exclamations is, in fact, Cicero, whose words Byron is at times paraphrasing in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. One cannot take a step in Athens, wrote Cicero, without treading upon some history (*quacunque enim ingredimur, in aliqua historia vestigium ponimus*),[17] a remark which was elaborated by Byron :

> Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground ;
> No earth of thine is lost in vulgar mould,
> But one vast realm of wonder spreads around,
> And all the Muse's tales seem truly told,
> Till the sense aches with gazing to behold
> The scenes our earliest dreams have dwelt upon.[18]

And in Cicero's writings there were other eloquent models for the mood of the Traveller to an Antique Land. There was a famous letter which Cicero's friend Sulpicius wrote to him on the death of his daughter—his account of his viewing the ruined cities of Greece as his boat sailed towards Megara : Aegina, Piraeus, Corinth.[19] It was as well known as almost anything in Latin literature and provided the

material for some brilliant lines in the last canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* :

> Wandering in youth, I traced the path of him,
> The Roman friend of Rome's least-mortal mind,
> The friend of Tully : as my bark did skim
> The bright blue waters with a fanning wind,
> Came Megara before me, and behind
> Aegina lay, Piraeus on the right,
> And Corinth on the left ; I lay reclined
> Along the prow, and saw all these unite
> In ruin, even as he had seen the desolate sight ;
>
> For Time hath not rebuilt them, but uprear'd
> Barbaric dwellings on their shatter'd site,
> Which only make more mourn'd and more endear'd
> The few last rays of their far-scatter'd light,
> And the crush'd relics of their vanish'd might.
> The Roman saw these tombs in his own age,
> These sepulchres of cities, which excite
> Sad wonder, and his yet surviving page
> The moral lesson bears, drawn from such pilgrimage.(20)

Even Byron's famous phrase about Greece being a 'sad relic of departed worth' is a deliberate transference of the Virgilian phrase, *tristes reliquiae Danaum.* Much of his material was not merely traditional material ; it was schoolboy traditional material.

Although Byron tried to retain and maintain some of the eighteenth-century poetic virtues, he had a keen scepticism about the conventional poetic formulas. 'Hail, Muse ! *et cetera*' is the beginning of Canto Three of *Don Juan.* But because of his intense receptiveness to what he himself actually saw and experienced in Greece, Byron provided a new reality for much of the old-fashioned poetic diction of a classicizing kind, by giving it a local habitation and a name in the Greek environment with which he was familiar. The opening stanza of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was an original way of dealing with the conventional invocation to the Muse (it was added later, after Byron's return to London, in reminiscent mood). It begins in the traditional manner—an appeal to the Muse to aid her poet from Parnassus, and to inspire him from her fountain of Castalia. But Byron immediately makes this old-fashioned jargon more effective by giving it a context in the experience of the sentimental traveller in Greece :

Yet there I've wander'd by thy vaunted rill;
Yes! sigh'd o'er Delphi's long deserted shrine,
Where, save that feeble fountain, all is still.

The trite items of schoolboy learning, and the battered ornaments of schoolboy verse-making, were revivified, when they had become hopelessly trivial—even to the schoolmasters; for, the memory of Coleridge's James Bowyer at Christ's Hospital is hard to resist:

'Lute, harp, and lyre, muse, muses, and inspirations, Pegasus, Parnassus, and Hippocrene, were all an abomination to him. In fancy I can almost hear him now, exclaiming, "*Harp? Harp? Lyre? Pen and ink, boy, you mean! Muse, boy, muse? Your Nurse's daughter you mean! Pierian spring! Oh, aye! the cloister-pump, I suppose!*" '(21)

But Byron writes deliberately in a manner which makes emotive use of these trite recollections. All the rant about Parnassus may be old stuff; but, listen, reader, I have been there; in fact, I am writing this stanza, I assure you, in full view of the mountain on 14 December 1809:

Oh, thou Parnassus! whom I now survey,
Not in the phrensy of a dreamer's eye,
Not in the fabled landscape of a lay,
But soaring snow-clad through thy native sky,
In the wild pomp of mountain-majesty!
What marvel if I thus essay to sing?

The full emotional effect is extracted from the contemplation of Parnassus, so much lauded by the poets, so rarely seen by them, and still so beautiful:

When I recount thy worshippers of yore
I tremble, and can only bend the knee;
Nor raise my voice, nor vainly dare to soar,
But gaze beneath thy cloudy canopy
In silent joy to think at last I look on Thee!(22)

In later years, Walter Scott, writing rather regretfully, contrasted his own claims to poetical success with those of his formidable rival, when he published *Rokeby* in the same year (1812) as that which saw the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: 'I was astonished at the power evinced by that work . . . There was a depth in his thought, an eager abundance in his diction, which argued full confidence in the inexhaustible resources of which he felt himself possessed. . . . Lord Byron was also a traveller, a

man whose ideas were fired by having seen, in distant scenes of difficulty and danger, the places whose very names are recorded in our bosoms as the shrines of ancient poetry.' This, as Scott knew, was Byron's great advantage at that time. No Northern mythology or topography or history could make such a strong appeal to the imagination of an educated reader. Byron wrote *his* poems about 'the scenes our earliest dreams have dwelt upon'.

When he set out on his travels in 1809, Byron, like many other young men about that time and during the previous twenty years since the revolutions in France had interrupted the normal movements of British travellers, followed the route to Constantinople instead of the road to Rome which had been so common in the eighteenth century. Anyone who has read the lively letters which Byron wrote during these two years of travel will be in no doubt that the lands of the Levant provide a most exciting episode in Byron's life, the experience which made him a poet. When he looked back, Byron thought that, from his early years, his interests had gravitated to the Near East ; certainly, he was excellently prepared for travel. He could not compare in classical erudition with several of his contemporaries in Greece ; but few of them were so well equipped by a knowledge of the recent history of the country. Byron knew the charm of being in places celebrated by ancient history and poetry, without being fussily engaged in identifying everything and wasting his energies and impressions upon anxious interpretations of ancient texts and elucidations of geography and topography. In many of his letters he wrote flippantly about his own activities in Greece ; but it is clear that he took considerable trouble to increase his knowledge, learning a good deal of the modern language and canvassing the contemporary state of culture of the Greeks. He described Greece as 'a country replete with the *brightest* and *darkest*, but always most *lively* colours of my memory';[23] and this intensity of his reactions to the physical appearance of Greece is constantly exemplified in his poetry :

> Fair clime ! where every season smiles
> Benignant o'er those blesséd isles,
> Which, seen from far Colonna's height,
> Make glad the heart that hails the sight,
> And lend to loneliness delight.[24]

'If I am a poet . . . the air of Greece has made me one', he told Trelawny. 'Travelling in Greece, Hobhouse and I wrangled every day. His guide was Mitford's fabulous

History. He had a greed for legendary lore, topography, inscriptions ; gabbled in *lingua franca* to the Ephori of the villages, goat-herds, and our dragoman. He would potter with map and compass at the foot of Pindus, Parnes, and Parnassus, to ascertain the site of some ancient temple or city. I rode my mule up them. They had haunted my dreams from boyhood . . . I gazed at the stars, and ruminated ; took no notes, asked no questions.'[25]

Byron would not be Byron if he did not treat the most serious thing with provocative gaiety—including the things which he felt most seriously about. When visiting the Troad, while his companions were eagerly investigating possible sites for Homer's Troy, he read, he alleged, out of bravado, not Homer, but the Virgilian travesty of Scarron. He was frequently in a mood to jeer at the archaeological interests of his companions in Greece. When he was invited to explore the antiquities of Ithaca (Trelawny reports), he turned peevishly away, saying, 'Do I look like one of those emasculated fogies ? Let's have a swim. I detest antiquarian twaddle. Do people think I have no lucid intervals, that I came to Greece to scribble more nonsense ?'[26]

It was not archaeology, nor even the picturesque, which was important for Byron. It was rather the *associations* of a place, the memories of great events, signalized by virtue, courage, passion.

> Greece is no lightsome land of social mirth :
> But he whom Sadness sootheth may abide,
> And scarce regret the region of his birth,
> When wandering slow by Delphi's sacred side,
> Or gazing o'er the plains where Greek and Persian died.[27]

It is this sense of the Greek tradition that pervades the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. But it is not merely the decay of the Greek nation that inspires melancholy. For Byron, there is, certainly, the cruel contrast between ancient and modern Greeks :

> Ah! Greece! they love thee least who owe thee most—
> Their birth, their blood, and that sublime record
> Of hero sires, who shame thy now degenerate horde![28]

But more cruel is the ingratitude of the nations of Europe who have inherited the Greek tradition ; more degrading is the contrast between the venerable relics of the past and the mean squabbles of plundering antiquaries. This feeling dominates the tone of the introduction of Greece into the poem.

Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they loved ;
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it had best behoved
To guard those relics.(29)

And the indignation of the verse is underlined by the fury of the note :

'We can all feel, or imagine, the regret with which the ruins of cities, once the capitals of empires, are beheld: the reflections suggested by such objects are too trite to require recapitulation. But never did the littleness of man, and the vanity of his very best virtues, of patriotism to exalt, and of valour to defend, his country, appear more conspicuous than in the record of what Athens was, and the certainty of what she now is. This theatre of contention between mighty factions, of the struggles of orators, the exaltation and deposition of tyrants, the triumph and punishment of generals, is now become a scene of petty intrigue and perpetual disturbance, between the bickering agents of certain British nobility and gentry. "The wild foxes, the owls and serpents in the ruins of Babylon," were surely less degrading than such inhabitants. The Turks have the plea of conquest for their tyranny, and the Greeks have only suffered the fortune of war, incidental to the bravest ; but how are the mighty fallen, when two painters contest the privilege of plundering the Parthenon, and triumph in turn, according to the tenor of each succeeding firman! Sylla could but punish, Philip subdue, and Xerxes burn Athens ; but it remained for the paltry antiquarian, and his despicable agents, to render her contemptible as himself and his pursuits.'

There is a good deal of continuity in Byron's intellectual interests and affinities. What entered his mind was tenaciously retained. What was important for him when he was young, was important for him in his maturity. He translated a piece of the *Prometheus Vinctus* at Harrow in 1804 ; these were (he tells us) his first Harrow verses and were received by Drury the headmaster 'but coolly'. In his excited *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte,* written in April 1814, he naturally uses the symbol of Prometheus, asking Napoleon,

Like the thief of fire from heaven,
Wilt thou withstand the shock ?
And share with him, the unforgiven,
His vulture and his rock! . . .

He in his fall preserved his pride,
And, if a mortal, had as proudly died!

He wrote his fine poem *Prometheus* in 1816, after he had heard Shelley translating the *Prometheus Vinctus* to him. And in *The Age of Bronze,* written at Genoa in 1823, he refers to the first address of Prometheus (whom he compares now to Napoleon at St. Helena) :

Hear! hear Prometheus from his rock appeal
To earth, air, ocean, all that felt or feel
His power and glory, all who yet shall hear
A name eternal as the rolling year ;
He teaches them the lesson taught so long,
So oft, so vainly—learn to do no wrong!

These interpretations of the Prometheus-story are presumably due to the influence of Shelley, who was writing his own *Prometheus Unbound* in 1818-19 ; and Byron was following in the footsteps of others in his age : Goethe had written his *Prometheus* in 1773 (a fragment of a drama and a monologue) and Beethoven composed his overture in 1810.

But Byron has Prometheus in all moods. When he was ill at Lerici in September 1822, 'How do you feel?' asked Trelawny. 'Feel! Why just as that damned obstreperous fellow felt chained to a rock, the vultures gnawing my midriff, and vitals, too, for I have no liver.'(30) In much the same way the historical symbols of the struggle for freedom—Thermopylae, Marathon, Salamis—remained for Byron until the end. He spoke in a flippant way about the Greeks and their cause, on many occasions ; but by the vigour of his mind Byron almost turned flippancy into a method of expression.

The Age of Bronze, which was written shortly before his departure for Greece, is a curious thing, something of a medley ; sometimes satiric in tone (its rhymed couplets remind one of *English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers*) ; sometimes it has a moral strength not unlike *The Vanity of Human Wishes,* but revealing Byron the liberal, serious in his appeal to a new spirit in men. It is Liberty which Byron apostrophises, in spite of the Congress of Vienna—a spirit of Liberty which he sees at work in the New World, where Bolivar was now engaging attention.

'Tis the *old* aspiration breathed afresh,
To kindle souls within degraded flesh,
Such as repulsed the Persian from the shore
Where Greece *was*—No! she still is Greece once more.
One common cause makes myriads of one breast,
Slaves of the East, or helots of the West :
On Andes' and on Athos' peaks unfurl'd,
The self-same standard streams o'er either world . . .

The Age of Bronze is a rather unexpected poem, unexpected when we remember that almost the only thing Byron was writing at this time was the later cantos of *Don Juan*. It makes clearer than does that more obviously sophisticated poem something of the feeling that took Byron to Greece. His juvenile poems are full of allusions to those glorious ancestors of his who had performed heroic deeds. The boyish enthusiasm is sometimes pleasantly expressed, as in his poem *On Leaving Newstead Abbey*, written in 1803 when he was fifteen. He appeals to

the mail-cover'd Barons, who proudly to battle
Led their vassals from Europe to Palestine's plain . . .
Paul and Hubert, too, sleep in the valley of Cressy ;
For the safety of Edward and England they fell . . .

And then there were the four brothers who fought under Prince Rupert at Marston Moor and 'enrich'd with their blood the bleak field'. In another poem (*Lachin y Gair*) his ancestors become ghostly Ossianic figures, haunting the Scots hills, where

Clouds there encircle the forms of my fathers ;
They dwell in the tempests of dark Loch na Garr.

But the new inhabitant of Newstead will not be unworthy of his ancient kinsmen :

Abroad, or at home, your remembrance imparting
New courage, he'll think upon glory and you.

And in a poem of 1807 (*Farewell to the Muse*) :

Can I sing of the deeds which my Fathers have done,
And raise my loud harp to the fame of my Sires ?

What Byron wrote about with feeling in his early poems he wrote about, sometimes with gleeful derision, in his latest. Those glorious ancestors who came over with William the Conqueror have been gaily transformed. 'I can't complain', he says in the tenth canto of *Don Juan*, about the Norman Conquest.

I can't complain, whose ancestors are there,
Erneis, Radulphus—eight-and-forty manors
(If that my memory doth not greatly err)
Were their reward for following Billy's banners(31).

The poet who had written of the classic lands with an exquisite concentration of the nostalgia of centuries :

And yet how lovely in thine age of woe,
Land of lost gods and godlike men, art thou!

the poet who had rhetorically asked,

Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth,
And long accustom'd bondage uncreate ?

and

Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not
Who would be free themselves must strike the blow ?(32)

that same poet when about to play a part in an extraordinary enterprise, the national liberation of Greece, and about to become known as the chief of the philhellenes, himself wrote :

When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home,
Let him combat for that of his neighbours ;
Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,
And get knock'd on the head for his labours.

But at Missolonghi, on his thirty-sixth birthday, 22 January 1824, in the last poem he wrote, the schoolboy's boast is being fulfilled.

Awake! (not Greece—she *is* awake !)
Awake my spirit! Think through *whom*
Thy life-blood tracks its parent lake,
And then strike home!

And his strong sense of loyalty to his ancestors—the associations of Newstead, shall I say?—enabled him to give the wonderful picture, in *The Siege of Corinth*, of Alp, the Greek of modern times who is sensitive to the historical associations of the landscape in which he lives and has his being. The spirits of the great figures of the Grecian past live on :

The very gale their names seemed sighing ;
The waters murmur'd of their name ;
The woods are peopled with their fame ;
The silent pillar, lone and grey,
Claim'd kindred with their sacred clay ;
Their spirits wrapp'd the dusky mountain,
Their memory sparkled o'er the fountain ;
The meanest rill, the mightiest river
Roll'd mingling with their fame for ever.
Despite of every yoke she bears,
That land is glory's still and theirs !
'Tis still a watchword to the earth :
When man would do a deed of worth
He points to Greece, and turns to tread,
So sanction'd, on the tyrant's head :
He looks to her, and rushes on
Where life is lost, or freedom won.(33)

It is, this month, a hundred and fifty years since Byron arrived in Greece. On 4 December 1809 he set out from Patras, along the southern shore of the Gulf of Corinth, reaching Athens on Christmas Day. And in those hundred and fifty years great changes have taken place. In Byron's time the Greek tradition was strong in Europe, a civilizing power which had acquired an even greater reputation as knowledge of the classical lands increased in the early nineteenth century. The Greek tradition was strong, but Greece herself had no place among the nations of Europe. Now, Greece herself has been restored among the Balkan nations ; but the Greek tradition has been destroyed. In our technological age, that Greek culture, once the standard of human endeavour, is now itself no more than a 'sad relic of departed worth'; it is unlike Byron's Greece—there is no hope of its revival. What Byron once felt, nostalgically, about the country of Greece, we can now feel about the civilization that Greece gave to the world.

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